

# OUT OF OUR LEAGUE

by Steve Zeisler

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A friend of mine is a football coach who recently faced a mini-rebellion on his team. One of the players voiced accusations that he was unfair because he didn't treat everybody exactly the same. He yelled at some of his players more than others. Some of the veteran players were given freedoms not offered to younger players. He did not pass out rewards and commendations equally to all. The coach listened to all this, and finally at the end of the discussion he said, "Everything you have said is true. But what you are describing is not injustice. What you are describing is football. The day that the coach has to respond to the whims of every player on the team and answer everyone's concern about how they are treated is the day this team will cease to be competitive." A coach has to have the right to make his own judgments, and those who are under the coach's command have to respond as players, not as equals.

In Romans 9:14 we are entering into a discussion with God that has a similar theme. Chapters 9 through 11 of Romans exist because of the wonderful promises made in the gospel to us. The question that necessarily occurs is, "Is the prize maker reliable?" The question implied in Romans 9:6 is, "Has the word of God to Israel failed?" By answering these questions regarding Israel we will be given encouragement in regard to the promises God has made to us.

## God Has No Equal

Like the discussion between the coach and his players, a discussion with God is not one between equals. Debate entered into with God is always going to be different from conversations we have with each other. There is no higher truth to which we can appeal when we question God about his behavior, no standard of justice above God to which he must attend.

Further, a conversation with God is also never merely an impersonal philosophical discussion. God doesn't have philosophical discussions. He invites us to speak to him, and the questions raised in this chapter are inevitable; we shouldn't be afraid to ask them. But we must recognize that in the long run discussions about God are going to be about us, not about him. He doesn't need information or answers. When we debate with God we are the ones who will be changed. We will discover things about him and ourselves and our world that will revolutionize us. There is no other option. Conversations with God take place not for his sake but for ours.

Let's read verses 14-18:

What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all! For he says to Moses,

"I will have mercy on whom I have mercy,  
and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion."

It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh: "I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden.

In the immediately preceding context Paul raised the question of the Jews' history and experience, which they had misread. They misunderstood the riches of their heritage. They assumed that God was very predictable, that he in fact was like them, that he would always act as they would if they were God. This is a very dangerous assumption. It is really the lie of the serpent in the garden of Eden when he said to the woman, "You can be like God." We experience the desire in our hearts over and over again to be so much like God that

he becomes unnecessary.

For instance, we saw last week that part of the problem the Jews had was that they looked at the richness of their heritage and said in effect, "Since we have been given much from God, we deserve more." That is a foolish conclusion. They deserved nothing; no one deserves anything from God. And they examined the chosenness of their forefathers and essentially made the statement, "Since we descend from those whom God has chosen, we must be chosen as well." But that again is a foolish assumption. It is presuming that we know the ways, the thoughts, the plans, and the choices of God. We have no right to such presumption.

In C.S. Lewis' marvelous phrase, "Aslan is not a tame lion." We can make no demands on God. We are foolish if we expect we know how he thinks and how he will act. We have no right to call him to account, no basis on which to judge him. We can ask him hard questions, but only so we can be changed by hearing his response.

Verse 13 of Romans 9 makes the hard statement that the twins in Rebekah's womb had different destinies determined before they were born: "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated." Jacob was the man whose family would become the nation Israel; the nation through whom the law and the Messiah would come. Esau's children would also become a nation, Edom, which is best known in Scripture for its treachery. So the question occurs to us in verse 14, "Is God therefore unjust in his freedom and his unpredictability, refusing to account for why he does what he does as he makes choices that impact the lives of human beings?" Paul's answer in the paragraph we just read is, "Not at all!"

## **Moses and Pharaoh**

Let's look carefully at the reasoning offered here. Paul chooses two very interesting people, Moses and Pharaoh, to begin his discussion of this question. He says that Moses received mercy from God. He does not say Moses received a reward from God. And Paul says that God hardened Pharaoh. He does not say God condemned Pharaoh.

The point of view of the Bible and this passage in particular is that we all begin life with a spiritual disease. We are already in rebellion against God when we are born. We don't start out neutral, with some rewarded for positive living and good choices, and others discarded for bad choices. We start out condemned, and some, God in his mercy rescues. Others he allows to continue along the path (even hardens them in their choices) so that the darkness that is already true of them becomes intensified, more obvious, and less disguised. But Paul does not say that God chooses condemnation for anyone, only that some receive his mercy.

The second thing we can observe in this discussion is that one might say Moses is among the best of all people and Pharaoh among the worst. Moses was known as the friend of God. He is said to have been the meekest man on the face of the earth, a man of humility and godliness who loved God and followed him, who knew sin and redemption. God says to Moses,

"I will have mercy on whom I have mercy,  
and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion."

That quotation is taken from one of the high points in Moses' life in Exodus 33. There we see Moses entering the tent of God with people standing outside slack-jawed at Moses' holiness and moral beauty. They watched as Moses worshiped before them and the *Shekinah* of God dropped down into their midst. God spoke to Moses as a man would speak to his friend. Later, in the context of God's uttering this very sentence, he prayed to know God's will and to be accompanied by God through his life. It was a moment in the life of a very godly and remarkable man.

The misreading of all of this that might occur to us is that God chose Moses because of something marvelous about him. But what Paul is saying is exactly not that. Even in the midst of all of Moses' prayer God declares that it is divine mercy and compassion that cause him to befriend Moses. He is not discovering something winsome in Moses; he is announcing his sovereignty: "I am going to do what I choose to do. I am not responsible to care for you because of something I see in you."

## Mercy Can't Be Earned

There is a very important corollary notion to that, and I hope that it is obvious to you: If there is nothing in us at our best and highest religious ascent that can make God choose us, then there is nothing in us at our worst to make him reject us either. At times you have probably had the experience of getting disgusted with yourself. You know things about yourself that nobody else knows that are sickening to you. I have had that experience, and on those occasions I feel I have to do something to fix myself up before I can pray or have fellowship with Christian people. I feel the need to spend some time doing some kind of penance, getting fixed before nearness to God is allowed. But he does not reject me at my worst. There is no difference between that condition and the most spiritually scrubbed condition I can achieve. I am not worthy of approach to God in either case. I receive his mercy because he is merciful and compassionate, and his love because he is loving.

In contrast to Moses, Pharaoh was among the worst of all people. He was a vile, cruel, and arrogant man. Human life was worth nothing to him. He was filled with self-love and attention to himself, willing to destroy those around him at a whim. But Paul does not say that God rejected Pharaoh because he was an evil man. The reason given for God's hardening of Pharaoh's rebellion, it is that God might be glorified. He hardened Pharaoh ultimately so that when the Exodus did take place it would be a miracle and the name of God would be praised. While Israel was wandering around in the wilderness, the people in the land of Canaan were scared to death of them because of the Exodus. The word of the Exodus went forth everywhere in the ancient world. Hundreds of years later the Philistines talked about the Exodus and were afraid in the presence of the Israelites (1 Samuel 4:8). God did such a remarkable miracle and his name was therefore so feared that his people were paid respect that they would never have otherwise had. God hardened Pharaoh in order to do something glorious, not because Pharaoh was evil.

Neither Moses nor Pharaoh deserved anything but hell. Neither man deserved the mercy of God. No one can ever presume that we have the right to his attention. And yet Moses heard the marvelous truth from the lips of God, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy," and God embraced Moses and spoke to him as his friend. Verse 16 reminds us, "It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy." Verses 19-29:

One of you will say to me: "Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?" But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? "Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?'" Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?

What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath--prepared for destruction? What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory---even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles? As he says in Hosea:

"I will call them 'my people' who are not my people;  
and I will call her 'my loved one' who is not my loved one,"  
and,  
"It will happen that in the very place where it was said to them,  
'You are not my people,'  
they will be called 'sons of the living God.'"

Isaiah cries out concerning Israel:  
"Though the number of the Israelites be like the sand by the sea,  
only the remnant will be saved.  
For the Lord will carry out  
his sentence on earth with speed and finality."

It is just as Isaiah said previously:

"Unless the Lord Almighty  
had left us descendants,  
we would have become like Sodom,  
we would have been like Gomorrah."

The question of verse 19 has taken things a step farther than the question of verse 14. It is inevitable that we are going to ask questions of God. Things seem unjust to us, so there will be times when these questions of the Lord burst from our lips: "Why this pain? Why this longing? Why this closed door? Why this person instead of that person? Why is blessing obvious here and not obvious there?" It is almost impossible not to have those questions occur to us. And it is legitimate to ask them if we let God answer on his terms. But by the time we get to verse 19, this is no longer legitimate questioning but petulance. "Who does this God think he is, anyway, that we should still be responsible when he is running around choosing this and choosing that and doing whatever he wants without consulting us?"

It is interesting that in this paragraph Paul depersonalizes the individuals who are asking the questions. He has just spoken of Moses and Pharaoh, men with names and histories and personalities. Here he speaks of lumps of clay and objects of wrath and mercy. Petulance is answered with sternness. The "who are you O man" of verse 20 could be paraphrased as, "Who are you, little fella, to be asking these questions of God?"

This is a bit like the way we speak with children, isn't it? Our children ask us hard questions: "Why are you doing this? I don't understand?" We give them sufficient explanation, but they don't like the explanation, so they start whining and stamping their feet. And eventually we say, "Take that whiny attitude of yours to your room and close the door and stay in there until I tell you to come out." We use harder, less personal language to declare that it is inappropriate to ask the question in that way. And it is inappropriate to say of the Lord of the universe, "Who does he think he is?"

### **God's Surprising Sovereignty**

Verses 22 and 23 go on to talk about God's patience with those who will ultimately be judged: "What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath....?" He is willing to judge those who deserve judgment, but what if he doesn't execute judgment quickly? What if he allows things to build over time and people seem to get away with it? What can we conclude from that? That he is stalling because he doesn't know what to do, is impotent, or afraid of bad press? No, if he is patient we conclude that he is doing good for those he will ultimately rescue.

If some other army had marched into Egypt and freed the Hebrew slaves, they would not have given glory to God. When Pharaoh was hardened repeatedly so that eventually God freed them by a miracle, the Lord's name was praised and people came to saving knowledge of him. If the Romanian people in this century living under the terror of the Ceausescu regime had been liberated by some human effort, the credit would have gone to whomever had sent the liberators. But they were liberated because the people of Romania began to pray and sing hymns in public, and there was an outpouring of concern for freedom; folks risked their lives for freedom's sake. And the overthrow of that regime is accounted for even by secular observers as a miracle, as something God did. He was patient long enough to allow the redemption to be viewed as from him and miraculous. His name was praised, his people were encouraged, and new opportunities for the gospel were created.

What if God decides to be patient if that is part of his sovereign choosing? We are very foolish if we begin to reduce our opinion of him because he is patient, thinking that he doesn't know what he is doing, that he can't be trusted. How can we ask in a whiny voice that God explain himself?

The rest of this section is filled with wonderful references to the surprises of God that the prophets Hosea and Isaiah wrote about. Israel, its first place in history, and yet only a remnant among many who really knew God. There have been other religious outpourings that have very little to do with God. The discovery that only a little remnant within the throng is really of the Lord shakes our sensibilities; it is contrary to our expectations. Hosea speaks of a nation's being chosen by surprise. A people or a community that seem benighted and rejected and set aside all of a sudden finds itself having the loving attention of God. And those who thought they deserved

his approval and his care are surprised to find him calling a people who previously had no name. He talks about a woman (or man) chosen as an unexpected loved one. The ugly stepsisters go off to the ball and leave Cinderella behind, and a miracle happens: She is chosen to be the partner of the prince.

I was at a high school homecoming football game last Friday night. As we watched all the floats go by, eventually we saw the homecoming court, and then at half time they announced which of the court were chosen homecoming queen and king. I remembered a girl back in my own high school days who entered ninth grade when I did. She was determined from that time (perhaps from many years earlier) to be the homecoming queen by the time she was a senior. So she joined all the clubs, looked appropriately perky and "homecoming-ish," and did everything she could to position herself to become homecoming queen---and yet she wasn't chosen.

The Scriptures, as Paul is remembering them here in the words of the prophets, are filled with God's doing surprising things. He is unpredictable. "Aslan is not a tame lion." God doesn't do what we imagine that he will; he doesn't act as we would act if we were God (which reinforces the important truth that we are not God).

We can imagine some surprising things God might do in our day, though, can't we? For instance, suppose Charles Colson actually had more say from jail than he ever did from the White House? Wouldn't that be astonishing?

What if it turned out that an Albanian nun named Theresa ministering in Calcutta had more moral authority than conventions filled with bishops and religious scholars? That wouldn't be the way we would have done it, but wouldn't it be a lot like the way God would do it?

What if it turned out that John Perkins, a man who had very little education, went to Mississippi to care for poor people there and then later did the same in Southern California, and he pleased his heavenly Father; while well-known TV evangelists were exposed as fakes and sent to jail? Wouldn't that make people wonder about the sovereignty of God?

What if there was a major-league pitcher whose career ended with cancer and disfiguring surgery, and he had more impact because of his suffering than scores of other athletes who thanked God for making them rich and successful? Who would have thought that the one who spoke of God out of his suffering would touch more lives?

What if it turned out that Messiah was born on earth and found faith among centurions and fishermen and harlots and lepers and tax collectors, but found almost none among the religious establishment? Wouldn't God be saying something about himself and his freedom and his sovereignty, and about how we are not God and he is?

Paul looks at Old Testament history and sees the Lord bring blessing where none was expected, choosing those whom no one would have chosen. He is saying clearly that this is the kind of God we serve. We make no contribution to his decisions; he doesn't seek our counsel. We have no right to demand that he explain himself.

So we are faced with a paradox: By repeatedly declaring the unrestricted freedom of God to choose, Paul has made it difficult for us to understand how that freedom does not cancel out our freedom. But it does not. We must live with this paradox. We must hold in our mind the truth of God's freedom to choose to show mercy, which can't be presumed on and should always be received with overwhelming thankfulness. And at the same time we must affirm that our choices are ours to freely make. There are no excuses for not believing. The offer is made to all. Look at the last paragraph of chapter 9:

What then shall we say? That the Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have obtained it, a righteousness that is by faith; but Israel, who pursued a law of righteousness, has not attained it. Why not? Because they pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works. They stumbled over the "stumbling stone." As it is written:

"See, I lay in Zion a stone that causes men to stumble  
and a rock that makes them fall,  
and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame."

God embraces unsuspecting Gentiles and gives them the gift of righteousness when they weren't looking for it. Israel, on the other hand, did not receive righteousness because of their pride. They wanted a righteous standing that was built on their own efforts. They didn't want righteousness as a free gift; they wanted it as a reward they had earned or deserved. And for that reason they did not achieve it.

Look very carefully what Paul does not say here. He does not say that Israel missed out on the gift of righteousness because they were not chosen. They missed out on the gift of righteousness because they rejected it. It was their fault. God is merciful out of his freedom to do whatever he will, and yet those who do not receive him do not because they choose not to.

If we could imagine some day interviewing men and women who have entered into the presence of God for eternity, we would hear them say, "I am a child of God because of his mercy. My salvation is completely dependent on him. I contributed nothing. He was merciful to me when I did not deserve it. To Him be all praise." If we could interview those who would spend eternity separated from Christ, what we would hear them say is something like this: "Eternal separation from God is my doing. I refused then, and I refuse now, to humble myself so as to place my faith in Christ. I am where I am because I choose to be."

I was talking to John Anacker last Sunday, and he said that when he was a young Christian he used to question God, "Why don't you save everybody? Why are there some saved and some not?" Then he said that the longer he lives, the more likely he is to ask the question, "Why did you save me? Knowing myself as I do, I don't understand why I have been given this gift I didn't deserve." Again, what we are seeing in that statement and in all of the discussion here is that there are questions that must be asked; and ultimately a change will take place, not by God's answering the question the way the questioner wants it to be answered, but by his changing the questioner. God intends to revolutionize us. He wants to bring about a change in perspective. He wants us to be willing to trust him with what we cannot understand, and to receive humbly the gifts he gives us.

The book of Job is another of the passages of Scripture that deal with these themes. Job questioned, "Why is God the way he is? Why isn't he more like us? Why doesn't he explain himself?" But by the end of the book Job said:

"I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear;  
But now my eye sees Thee;  
Therefore I retract,  
And I repent in dust and ashes."

When it was all discussion, merely hearing about God in the arguments that took place over various philosophies, Job had one reaction. But when he encountered the Lord himself, he retracted his complaints and repented in dust and ashes. Paul is leading us into these questions precisely for that reason. He wants to encourage more love for God; more appreciation of the gifts he gives; more humility; more certainty that we don't deserve anything; and therefore more gratitude for what he does give us.

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